

Recognising Wartime Service in Public Utilities

By Perry Beor

The recent story in the EHA Magazine about the NSW Railway & Tramway WWI Honour Boards reflected a similar experience some years ago with the West Australian Water Corporation's WWI Honour Board in Perth.

From 1912, all Government water supply, sewerage, irrigation and drainage operations in Western Australia were the responsibility of the Metropolitan Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage Department. By the time war was declared in August 1914, the Department had a workforce of 1,286. Of this group, 351 people joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). This sense of duty was reflected in the 1914-15 Annual Report: *The Empire's call to arms has met with a response from this Department that indicates the presence of a strongly loyal and patriotic spirit.*



The "Old Barracks", the home of the WA Water Corporation when its WWI Honour Board was first installed.

Image: Undated, from the Heritage Perth website.



The WWI Honour Board, as restored, and in its new home in the foyer at the Water Corporation HQ.

Image: WA Corporation.

Even by the time of that report, two staff had already been reported killed in action. In each succeeding annual report, the names of those staff members who had been killed in action were faithfully recorded as the first item, totalling 23 people by war's end. Overall, the Department's war record matched those of many other government enterprises, with two Military Crosses, two Distinguished Conduct Medals and a Distinguished Service Order being awarded to its employees.

The efforts of those who remained was also recognised: *The absence at war of a large number of officers has caused considerable dislocation and thrown much extra work on the remaining officers. These have accepted the added burden in a loyal and cheerful spirit, and very great credit is due to the whole staff for most excellent work in dealing under these difficult circumstances with the operations of the Department.* In common with most other government departments, a large Honour Board was unveiled soon after the war. This recorded not only the names of the Fallen but also listed all who answered the bugle's call and joined up from the Department.

For many years this Honour Board resided in pride of place in the old barracks where the Department was based until 1966 when it moved with the rest of the Department to Dumas House. The latter was built as part of a plan to centralise all WA Government departments near Parliament House. Dumas House fulfils this task to this day (though the other four buildings planned in the same area were never proceeded with).

With the move of the by-then Water Authority into the purpose-built John Tonkin Water Centre in the early 1980s, the honour board was forgotten and placed in a storage shed at a metropolitan reservoir. It was 'rediscovered' there in 1990, when it was restored and placed back in the foyer at Water Corporation HQ.

The EHA Magazine story (Jan. 2021) of the NSW Honour Boards was complemented by a couple of brief biographies of NSW railway & tramway soldiers – picked from the hundreds of biographies completed for the NSW project. Perry has chosen one distinguished soldier from the WA Water Corporation Honour Board to feature in this story.

The Editor.

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A Distinguished WW1 Serviceman & Member of Departmental Staff

What was significant in the service of the Department's staff was how many of them replicated their civilian life in the military – supplying water to their customers – though, in this case, it was the front line. The most noteworthy was the Department's Principal Engineer –

Major Frederick Washington Lawson DSO, MICE, MIMechE, MIEAust (1869-1924).

In 1916, Frederick Lawson answered the bugle's call and joined the AIF. He was commissioned into the 6th Tunnelling Company, Royal Australian Engineers, and embarked at Fremantle on His Majesty's Australian Transport *Warilda* for the Western Front, on 1 July 1916 with a number of other employees of the Department.

On 20 September 1917, Major Lawson was recommended for two Distinguished Service Orders (the second being downgraded to a Mentioned in Dispatches as it was related to the first) for basically doing his civilian job in uniform – and under fire. The citations make very interesting reading. (A DSO rates just below a VC and is for distinguished services during active operations against the enemy). His Citations read:

Distinguished Service Order

Major Lawson has been in charge of the Corps water supplies during the period that 1st ANZAC Corps have held the present front, on our taking over this area no water supply existed east of Zillebeke, owing to the impossibility of keeping the water main in operations due to the heavy artillery fire. Major Lawson however did the impossible and by 20th September (1st Battle of the Menin Rd) he had carried his water mains to Bellewaerde Lake and supplied the Advance troops. Major Lawson personally superintended the repairs during the 1st, 2nd and 3rd battles and has continually advanced his mains. He has set an example of devotion to duty and fearlessness which has kept his detachments at work under the severest conditions.



Major Lawson during WW1. Image: Source not provided.

Mentioned in Dispatches

During the 20th September 1917, from early morning till night Major F.W. Lawson with a section of the 133rd Company R.E. (Royal Engineers) under Captain Rhodes worked unremittingly in repairing the pipeline he had previously laid to the front.

The line was again and again cut by shell fire but owing to the personal example of Major Lawson the repairs were quickly effected and the water supply for the front line troops was kept going. He was under continual and heavy shell fire and displayed a fine example of indifference to danger and determination to carry out his work regardless of self.

This Officer was struck by a shell splinter but fortunately was not seriously hurt.

By March 1918, Lawson was the Corps Water Supply Officer, responsible for supplying drinking and washing water for the 110,000 men and 80,000 horses (which required ten times the daily water supply provided to a soldier) of the Australian Corps. He had complete control of the construction and maintenance of pipelines, pumping plant, purifying works and reservoirs for the Corps with as many as 1,200 troops employed on these tasks at any one time. The task was further complicated by the troops having to change their positions almost daily. During the 1918 Autumn Offensive from Villers-Bretonneux to the Hindenburg Line, for example, the Australian troops advanced 50km in three months. The water supply works that were implemented were so effective that during Lawson's tenure, there were no cases of serious disease in the Australian Corps that could be attributed to the water supply.

On demobilisation in June 1919, Lawson returned to his job. Over the next five years, he doubled the available daily water supply in line with the increasing spread of reticulated scheme water in Perth, as well as initiating a number of other far-reaching schemes.

As a sad postscript to this story, however, he committed suicide in November 1924. This followed the collapse of a wall at a metropolitan reservoir – ironically the same one as where the honour board was stored – which had only opened the week before. The subsequent inquiry and a particularly vehement campaign against him by the Daily News, no doubt contributed to what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder.